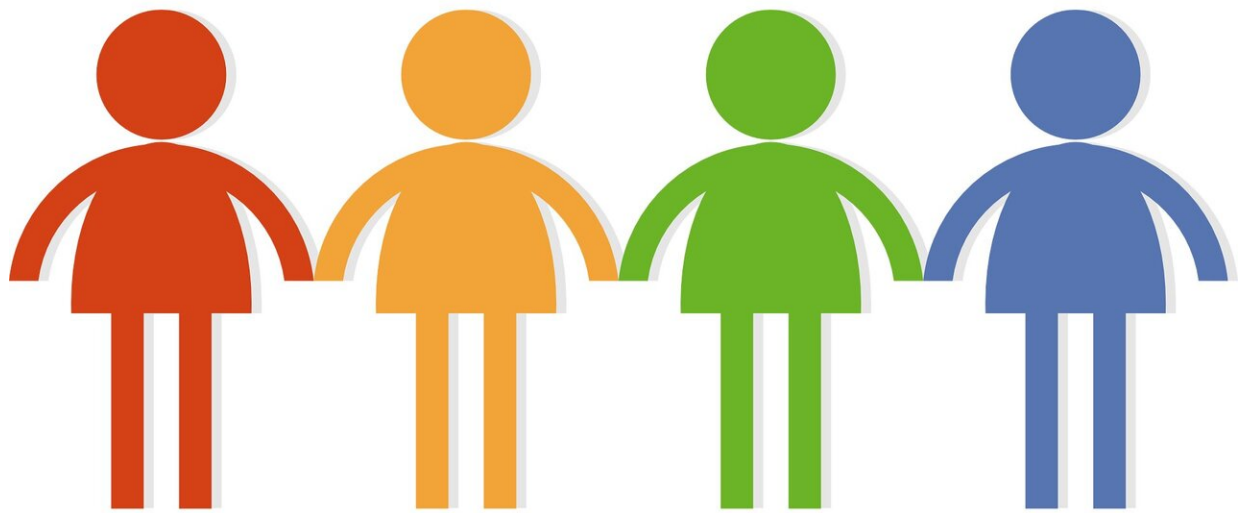


Rewarding teamwork is key to improving primary children's spelling, says study

October 3 2019



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Pupils do better in spelling tests if teachers reward them for team—rather than individual—performance, according to new findings published in the peer-reviewed journal *Educational Psychology*.

The study, based on 1,000 primary students, highlights how [academic ability](#) can be improved by incentives when used effectively. The researchers found that children of all abilities who competed in groups

against other teams for rewards such as verbal praise and actual prizes achieved higher scores.

They suggest that a common goal of winning and an 'us versus them' mindset encourages higher-achieving pupils to help the weakest in their group do better. This team learning approach is preferable to rewarding just the best student in a class at the expense of others—or pupils getting nothing at all.

Schools commonly use rewards to motivate students to behave or achieve academically. However, experts are divided on whether the approach is effective—some report a negative impact while others conclude incentives help modify [pupil](#) attitudes.

In addition, few researchers until now have investigated long term if there is an ideal method of reward-giving to encourage learning, especially in schools outside western countries.

"Our study helps put to bed the question of whether or not to use rewards," says lead author Dr. Sim Tick Ngee from the National University of Singapore.

"It shows the focus should be instead on the more nuanced but important and useful question of how rewards can be used more effectively."

The researchers recruited 1,005 students from three government-aided, co-educational Singapore primary schools. Pupils' ability levels were assessed at the outset as high, middle or low, and their spelling test scores tracked over ten weeks. Teachers were also asked to rate behavior on the basis of how it benefited others.

Each child was randomly assigned to one of five categories of reward-based teaching. The competitive method involved teachers rewarding

only the [student](#) scoring highest in the class. Those in the cooperative category performed as a group—each member's performance affected the team's overall chance of a prize.

Other children followed an individualistic approach where each was rewarded on reaching their personal goal. Pupils were also assigned to groups that co-operated together but competed against other teams. The final category combined co-operation with individualism—children were assigned to a group but helped each another reach individual targets.

Stickers, smiles and prizes, such as lessons in balloon sculpting, were among the rewards given. The teachers also used stars as a general indicator of success.

A complex picture emerged of how rewards and different learning approaches changed performance. Pupils of low ability benefited from cooperative and competitive approaches, but not from individualistic ones. Competition appeared to spur on middle ability students, and high ability students benefited from a cooperative approach combined with either competitive or individual learning.

Co-operative learning played a key role in pupils being more helpful and sensitive towards one another, although competitive and individualistic approaches also improved behavior.

Co-author Francesca Li Ting Wah explained these results suggest that students "become more prosocial, as they become more familiar and have more contact with their classmates".

She added: "Co-operation plays a key role in cultivating social connectedness. On the other hand, increases in prosocial behavior were also seen for competitive reward pedagogy for high and middle ability students, and for individualistic reward pedagogy for middle and low

ability students. These results advise caution against a conclusion that co-operation is solely at work."

More information: *Educational Psychology*,
[www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10 ... 1443410.2019.1662888](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10...1443410.2019.1662888)

Provided by Taylor & Francis

Citation: Rewarding teamwork is key to improving primary children's spelling, says study (2019, October 3) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-09-rewarding-teamwork-key-primary-children.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.